

Bill provides record increases in Veterans' health spending, oversight

(Washington, DC) Congressman Tim Ryan (OH-17), a member of House Committee on Appropriations, applauded the Committee for passing the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill yesterday. The bill, which Congressman Ryan voted for and which passed by a vote of 56-0, includes a \$6.7 billion increase over FY 2007 levels for the Department of Veterans Affairs for claims processing, medical care and facility improvements at places like Walter Reed Medical Center. The bill also includes \$4.4 billion for veterans' health care and creates new programs aimed at combating post-traumatic stress disorder and increased assistance for homeless veterans.

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"This bill is proof that Congress is 100 percent committed to supporting our troops—not just when they are in the field, but when they come home as well."
said Congressman Ryan.

"Our veterans put their lives on the line for us, and they deserve first class medical care."

Other projects covered in the bill include \$2.9 billion for mental health and substance abuse, \$130 million for assistance for homeless vets, \$4.1 billion for medical facilities and \$76.5 million to increase the size of the Inspector General's office tasked with ensuring Veteran's Administration monies are spent wisely. A bulleted list of the programs can be found below.

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KEY INVESTMENTS

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: \$43.2 billion, \$6.7 billion above 2007 and \$3.8 billion over the President's request for veterans medical care, claims processing personnel, and facility improvements.

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Veterans Health Administration, \$37.1 billion, \$2.5 billion over the President's request and \$4.4 billion over 2007 for veterans medical care. The Veterans Health Administration estimates they will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2008 including more than 263,345 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, 54,000 more than fiscal year 2007.

- **Medical Services:** \$28.9 billion, \$1.7 billion above the President request and \$3.4 billion above 2007 to improve access to medical services for all veterans.

- o **New Initiatives to Improve Access to Vital Services:** \$600 million for new initiative for mental health and PTSD, including funding to ensure the five Level I Polytrauma Centers and the three Centers of Excellence for Mental Health and PTSD are fully operational in 2008. These Centers treat the signature injuries for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, including traumatic brain injury, and provide vital services to these veterans and their families as they transition back to their communities.

o **Mental Health and Substance Abuse:** \$2.9 billion, \$100 million over 2007, matching the President's request for specialty mental health care and \$429 million, \$70 million above the President's request and \$72 million above 2007 for the Substance Abuse Program. The President's request did not even provide for inflation within the Department's Substance Abuse Program and cut the number of psychiatric inpatient beds.

o **Assistance for Homeless Vets:** \$130 million, \$23 million above the President's request and \$38 million over 2007 for the homeless grants and per diem program to help care for an 2,300 additional homeless veterans.

o **Health Care Sharing Incentive Fund:** a minimum of \$15 million, to be used for joint programs with the Department of Defense to increase research, improve access to care, and ensure a more seamless transition for our veterans, particularly in the areas of greatest concern for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan: traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, increased survival of severe burns, and amputation.

• **Medical Administration:** \$3.6 billion, \$193 million above the President's request and \$458 million above 2007 to ensure the efficient operation of the Department's health care system.

- **Medical Facilities:** \$4.1 billion, \$508 million above the President's request and \$530 million above 2007 for on-going maintenance and renovations of existing facilities to address identified shortfalls and to ensure the Department's facilities remain capable of delivering world class medicine. The Department currently estimates a maintenance backlog of over \$5 billion.

- **Medical and Prosthetic Research:** \$480 million, \$69 million above the President's request and \$66 million above 2007 for research to improve the quality of life for injured and aging veterans. The increase will help to attack the emerging issues facing those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Extended Care Facilities: \$165 million, \$80 million above 2007, for grants to states for construction and modification of extended care facilities. The funding level will satisfy all currently identified life/safety needs and still provide funding for construction of three new facilities.

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General Operating Expenses: \$1.6 billion, \$127 million over the President's request and \$117 million above 2007 to enable the Department to hire roughly 1,100 additional claims processors to work-down the backlog of benefits claims and to reduce the time to process new claims. The most recent VA Quarterly Status Report estimates that nearly 400,000 claims have exceeded the 160 day goal for processing.

Information Technology, \$1.9 billion, \$645 million above 2007, matching the President's request to improve the health records system to help ensure that medical information follows patients as they transition from the Department of Defense health system to the VA health system.

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Phone and Web Assistance: \$5 million is included within General Operating Expenses for the Department to establish a toll-free telephone number and web page to make it easier for veterans to get assistance and provide feedback.

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Inspector General: \$76.5 million, \$5.9 million above 2007 and \$3.9 million over the President's request, reversing a three-year decline in staffing for the Office. This funding will enable the Office to hire 50 people to provide necessary oversight of departmental operations, ensuring that resources are spent wisely and that veterans receive the quality care they deserve.

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OTHER IMPORTANT POLICY ITEMS

Increased Oversight: Requires multiple reports how funds are spent and additional Congressional notifications and approvals of transfers and reprogrammings.

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Future Planning: Directs the Congressional Budget Office to report on future funding needs for the Department to provide medical care. The Administration's budget predicts that the Veterans Health Administration will need less funding in future years.

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Improving Records: Requires VA's Electronic Medical Records be interoperable with the Department of Defense's medical records system.

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Psychiatric Care: Prevents inpatient beds from being decreased at facilities with a waiting list for inpatient psychiatric care.